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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PRETORIA 004598

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SUBJECT: NEC MEMBER EBRAHIM SAYS TOO EARLY TO SPECULATE ON
ANC SUCCESSION

REF: A. PRETORIA 4310

[1](#)B. PRETORIA 4511

[1](#)C. 2005 PRETORIA 1528

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Donald Teitelbaum. Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION: This is the second in a series of cables on the strengths and weaknesses of the emerging candidates for the ANC and national presidencies in South Africa (Ref A). This messages presents the view of Ebrahim Ebrahim, ANC National Executive Council member and former Political Advisor to Jacob Zuma. Ebrahim, who was imprisoned on Robben Island with Zuma, said the current speculation about the ANC presidential succession is "mere guesswork." The real canvassing for the ANC presidency will kick off in May or June 2007. Ebrahim claimed that Zuma is a "genuine" person who is not corrupt, but was "misled" and demonstrated poor judgment. Zuma is popular with poor South Africans around the country, not just in KwaZulu-Natal, a fact that President Mbeki does not fully appreciate. Ebrahim said he does not think the ANC membership wants a "BEE tycoon" such as Ramaphosa or Sexwale, as the next president; Ebrahim would support ANC Secretary-General Motlanthe whom he believes could unite the party factions. END SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION.

Too Early to Speculate on Succession

[1](#)2. (C) PolOff met with Ebrahim Ebrahim (strictly protect) October 25 to discuss Jacob Zuma's political future and Ebrahim's conflict resolution work in Sri Lanka and Bolivia (septels). Ebrahim, an African National Congress (ANC) National Executive Council (NEC) Member and former Political Advisor to Jacob Zuma when Zuma was SAG Deputy President (see bio-note at paras 10-11), told PolOff that the "real canvassing" for the ANC presidential election will only begin in May or June 2007, in advance of the ANC National Congress in December. The current speculation in the press is "mere guesswork." No one -- not even President Mbeki -- knows how the race will develop at this stage.

Zuma Misled, but Popular

[1](#)3. (C) Ebrahim, who was imprisoned with Jacob Zuma on Robben Island, said that Zuma was a "genuine" person who was "not corrupt." Zuma "has been misled by some people" (COMMENT: likely referring to former Zuma financial advisor Schabir Shaik). Ebrahim noted that many Zuma allies, including

himself, were disappointed by how Zuma handled the rape allegation and trial (NFI).

¶4. (C) Ebrahim suggested that Zuma would be an "excellent" president of the ANC party because of his open personality and broad appeal across the country, but perhaps would not be such a good president of the country. This has led some in the ANC to discuss the idea of splitting the ANC and SAG presidencies. However, many in the ANC, in both the Zuma and Mbeki camps, oppose this idea because it would create "two centers of power." Ebrahim admitted that Zuma knows "nothing" about economics and, if elected president, would need substantial support in this area.

¶5. (C) Despite the claims of Mbeki supporters, Zuma has substantial grassroots support, Ebrahim argued, and not just in KwaZulu-Natal. While it is true that some of Zuma's base comes from those who dislike Mbeki and his policies, Zuma's anti-poverty message and personal story (rising from humble beginnings) resonates with South Africans, particularly in poor communities. Contrary to Mbeki's aloof style, Zuma has the "common touch" with the people, like Mandela. Ebrahim said that Mbeki's supporters tend to dismiss Zuma's popular appeal, which is a mistake. Ebrahim personally urged Joel Netshitenzhe, presidential policy advisor and close Mbeki ally, to do a serious analysis of the reasons that Zuma has so much political support. Ebrahim thinks that understanding Zuma's support is important for the future of the party.

No BEE Tycoons, but perhaps Motlanthe

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¶6. (C) Asked about other possible candidates for the ANC presidency, Ebrahim said that he does not think the ANC membership wants a "BEE tycoon," like Cyril Ramaphosa or Tokyo Sexwale, as their next president. He personally could support ANC Secretary-General Kgalema Motlanthe, who he believes would be able to reunify the party.

Membership More Assertive

¶7. (C) Ebrahim also noted that the ANC membership is becoming increasingly assertive because of their growing frustration with the party leadership. At the last ANC NEC meeting, members spoke up more forcefully and challenged the party leadership. Even in Parliament, ANC MPs are beginning to assert their independence, such as on the same-sex union bill. Ebrahim believes this is a healthy development for the party and South Africa's democracy (COMMENT: it also could be read as Mbeki's waning influence over ANC members as he enters his final years of office).

Adam Habib Concern

¶8. (C) Ebrahim asked about case of Adam Habib, the South African academic who was denied entry into the United States on October 21 (Ref B). Ebrahim, who is a Muslim like Habib, said that he has known Habib for many years and was "shocked" by the U.S. decision. He had always viewed Habib as a "moderate" who was open to the West. Ebrahim said that following the Habib incident, he is personally afraid to travel to California next year when his daughter graduates from Stanford. (NOTE: PolOff met with two other senior think tank officials October 25, Ivor Jenkins of IDASA and Peter Kagwanja formerly of the International Crisis Group, who both expressed their outrage at the Habib case. Both said they know Habib well and cannot imagine why he was denied entry into the United States. END NOTE.)

Comment

¶9. (C) We agree with Ebrahim that it is too early to speculate with any accuracy about the ANC succession battle. Ebrahim's suggestion that Zuma has widespread appeal warrants closer examination, but we question Zuma's staying power as an ANC presidential candidate, especially if charged again for corruption. Ebrahim's admission that he would support ANC Secretary-General Motlanthe in the succession battle confirms what we have been hearing from several ANC insiders and analysts -- that Zuma's core supporters (including the SACP and COSATU) are coalescing around Motlanthe as their "back up candidate" should Zuma fall by the wayside.

Bio-Note

¶10. (C) Born in 1937, Ebrahim Ebrahim joined the ANC in 1952 and the armed wing of the party, Umkhonto we Sizwe, in 1960. He was arrested in 1961 and sentenced to 15 years imprisonment on Robben Island. After his release from Robben Island in 1979, Ebrahim fled into exile. In 1986, the South African security forces kidnapped Ebrahim in Swaziland and charged him with high treason. He was released five years later when an appeal court ruled that his abduction from a foreign country was illegal.

¶11. (C) Ebrahim was elected to the ANC National Executive Committee in 1991, and served as Member of Parliament from 1994 to 2002, including as Chairperson of the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee. Ebrahim was SAG Deputy President Jacob Zuma's Political Advisor from 2002 to 2005, and was deeply involved in Zuma's work as mediator in Burundi (Ref C). Together with former National Party minister and negotiator Roelf Meyer, Ebrahim is involved in conflict resolution work in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bolivia. Ebrahim has a child, Cassia, from a previous engagement to a U.S. citizen, Julie Wells. Per para 8, Cassia is a student at Stanford University. Ebrahim is currently married to Shannon Field, a South African who grew up in Canada. Field works in the SAG Presidency as a conflict resolution advisor, and she and Ebrahim are expecting a child in November.

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